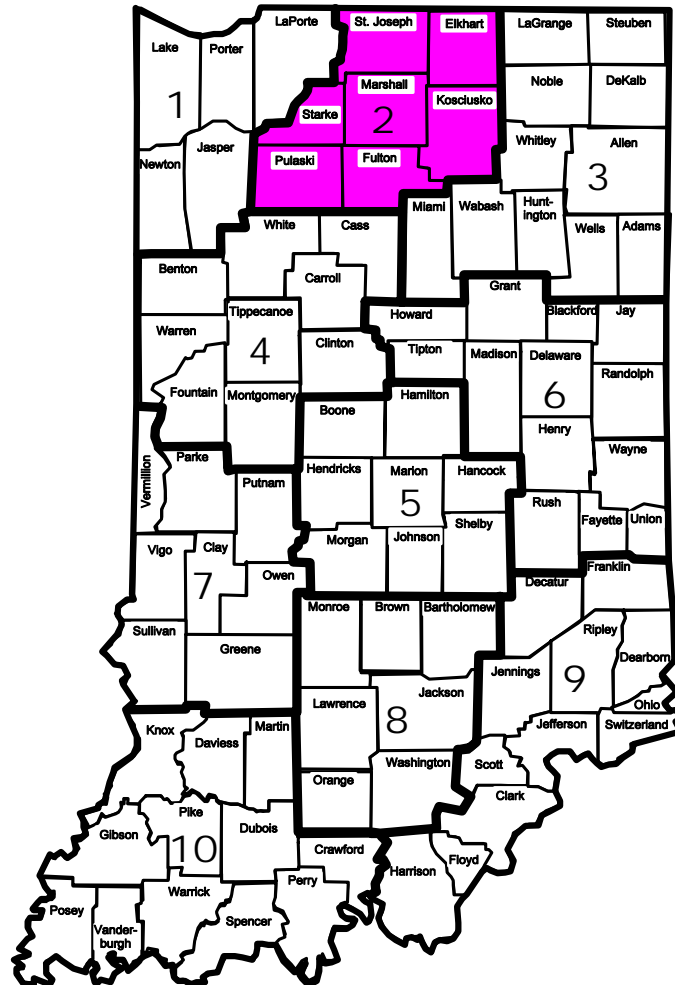


News From the Field.....

Public Health Preparedness Districts



Investigation of White Powder Incident

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During the fall of 2001, there were many reported incidents of suspicious, powdery substances found in various locations across the nation. State agencies and law enforcement officials in Indiana also received such calls. Since then, the number of reported incidents has dramatically decreased. However, in the fall of 2004, a northern Indiana county responded once again to such a call.

A postal worker on his regular route opened a business mailbox and placed mail in the box when he noticed a powdery substance in the bottom of the box that became airborne when the box was opened. The postal worker entered the business, explained what had happened, and asked to wash his hands. An employee went to the mailbox and opened it as well. The postal worker notified his supervisor and then continued on his regular route.

The business employee notified the local police and fire departments, which in turn, through trainings and local efforts to establish contacts, notified the local health department (LHD) and the field epidemiologist from the Indiana State Department of Health (ISDH). The police and fire departments already had secured the scene and identified those exposed. The LHD and the ISDH field epidemiologist recommended that the postal worker be located, discontinue his route, and receive decontamination since the substance could not be readily identified. The route and possible exposure points from the business to the postal employee's location were carefully noted in the event that further action would be needed.

It was decided that decontamination would take place at a local hospital. The hospital infection control person was notified of the incident and quietly assembled a team to address the situation. Since the agent was unknown, hospital personnel requested that the postal worker remain in the postal vehicle, and the hospital team would come to transport him. The business employee who opened the mailbox after the postal worker also reported to the hospital for decontamination. Since the initial diagnosis was possible exposure to anthrax, decontamination consisted simply of a soap and water shower. Clothes and personal belongings of those exposed were bagged and secured in the hospital in the event that further cleaning would be required based on identification of the substance.

The fire department double bagged the mailbox and removed it from the building. The police department closed the office building, since the extent of the contaminant could not be determined. The police department also secured the vehicles of those that went to the hospital. The fire department, using mutual aid agreements, took the mailbox and powder samples to a neighboring county for testing. The powder did not exactly match any specific substance within the testing parameters, including anthrax or other biological agents. When test results indicated the substance was not likely a biological agent, the LHD, in concurrence with hospital and police department, agreed to release those exposed and their property without additional treatment.

The police and fire departments established contacts throughout the evening with the local and state health departments to continue working on the situation. The local and state health departments held several meetings via conference phone with the police, fire, hospital, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in an effort to resolve the situation as quickly as possible. The FBI was ready to respond if the situation was deemed a "credible threat" by local law enforcement.

Since the business had been the target of vandalism and mischief prior to this incident, the local police department deemed this situation to be a "credible threat" and decided to submit a sample of the material to the ISDH Laboratories for confirmation that it was not a biological agent. There was some uncertainty on how the sample was to be transported from the county to the state lab, including maintaining the chain of custody due to the ongoing criminal investigation. Eventually, the sample was received at the state lab. The laboratory quickly determined that it was not a biological agent. The United States Postal Service, based on the information provided by the state lab, was able to take the sample for identification. This case is still an open investigation by the local police department.

Communication is routinely identified as a major obstacle when responding to any event or emergency. In this scenario, however, communications were handled with ease by keeping established contacts in place based on relationships. LHD communicable disease personnel maintained contact with the hospital and environmental health, and the LHD environmental health personnel maintained contact with the FBI

and police and fire departments. This worked well in this incident since there were previous contacts with these agencies, and those relationships helped with open communications. Once the substance was determined to be unlikely a biological agent based on initial testing, the only agencies that remained in contact directly were the LHD, ISDH, and local police department.
